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MANCHESTER NEW COLLEGE, LONDON.

Address

TO

THE THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS,

DELIVERED AT THE CLOSE OF THE SESSION, 1876-77,

BY

JOHN HAMILTON THOM,
VISITOR.

"The College adheres to its original principle of freely imparting Theological knowledge without insisting on the adoption of particular Theological doctrines."

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ADDRESS.

GENTLEMEN,

THE Theological, or, as I might prefer to call you, the Divinity Students of Manchester New College, inasmuch as the latter term has only an affirmative connotation and suggests no controversy, to you alone I am now to speak: all others here present, out of their respect for freedom of teaching, and their interest in the future Leaders of Free Churches, expect no word to be addressed to them. I am relieved too from the responsibility of an unlimited liberty of choice as to the topics on which I may address you. It would not be proper for me to speak to you on any subject that belongs to the province of any one of your Professors. Doubtless, apart from such presumption, there are abundant cognate questions worthy to be associated with an Academical occasion, but the discussion of any of them would here be open to the objection, that it had no fitness to the time, no natural connection with the requirements or suggestions of the last hour of

an Academic year, that just now it would be like the exhibition at a clinical lecture of the properties of a medicine not required for present use, and so, whatever might be its worth in its proper place, not *ad rem*, of no application to the crisis or the case. What you need at this moment is not to have a fresh investigation opened to you, nor yet to be nerved and braced for study, but some impressions under which profitably you may be relaxed and released; no new strain or burden, but a friendly and sympathizing "word spoken in season," I suppose I may add "to those who are weary," weary of a nine months' pressure from I know not how many ardent Professors, here and elsewhere, each urging his special subject as if there was no other, and your time was all his own. Happily, then, for those who may now be only longing for some blameless rest, my office embraces none of the severer lines of special qualification, but rather the *end* you have in view, and the *spirit* without which no intellectual or instrumental qualifications, though severally they were all perfect, can serve or reach that end, the τέλος of your being. In fact, Gentlemen, I feel as if it was now my duty simply to resume my old function of a preacher—only to a special audience.

"*Is the Pulpit losing its Power?*" is a question which has recently been discussed in a prominent periodical by a distinguished minister of the Congregational Churches. It is a question in which you, Gentlemen, are vitally concerned. If the influence of the Pulpit is

decaying, and must continue to decay, from causes which no personal energy can transcend, if its functions are dying out, and are henceforth to be more effectually discharged by some other agency, it can be no man's duty to give himself to a profession from which the life is departing, to pour his soul through an instrument that will emit no corresponding voice; rather ought he, caring more for the breathing spirit than for its channel of expression, in the vigour and hopefulness of his youth, to transfer his own vitality to the other organs, whatever they may be, of spiritual effluence and influence which are destined gradually to appropriate, and at last wholly to occupy, the ever-dwindling province of an effete institution. It ought clearly to be before you, that in the *special* career for which you are now qualifying, there are only two forms of action by which in public you can conspicuously touch the springs of life in your fellow-men, or in private beneficently nourish the individual roots of social progress; you must be great Preachers, or great Pastors. And by great preachers and great pastors, I do not mean that you must be marked out by the hand of God in exceptional endowments of thought and utterance, or in the incommunicable magic of a personal grace and persuasion—but that the religious vitality in you must be so rich and full that it will overflow, and make itself felt through one or other, or both, of the two means of power with which you will be trusted. Without exalting the religious influence of a professional minister of the Gospel

over that which may be exerted by, or emanate from, other men in other walks of service,—for where the inner light shines clear the influence that is not aimed, the arrows that are never seen to be laid to the bow, may, like the influences from God himself, go home to the hearts of men with the mightiest power and the least offence,—there is yet this peculiarity in men of your profession, that you select *direct* means of spiritual influence as your way of doing the work of God in the world, and if in this there is a failure, through defects of nature or of culture, or because devotedness is not pure, or because the institution itself is growing obsolete, you have mistaken or lost your whole vocation.

Whether the Pulpit is losing its power, is a question the answer to which will depend upon what kind of loss is meant. If it is comparative loss, relative to the changing proportions of influence, as exerted by it and by other great moral and social agencies, the answer must be, Yes. But if it is absolute loss that is meant, of an actual power and sway which once it had now departing from it, loss not of *status* merely in reference to the widening sphere of other institutions, but of its own vitality, either by the degeneration of those who wield it, or by such changes in the conditions of society as render it an instrument no longer fitted for the times, the answer must be absolutely, No. Doubtless Literature in all its beneficent forms,—the multiplication of cheap books on all subjects of human interest, for excellence as well as for cheapness unattainable not long

since,—the more diffused power of reading, reaching even the darkest and most ignorant through the life that is getting kindled in their children,—the amount of speculation on the most serious questions, touched upon in every daily newspaper, and more largely discussed by every kind of periodical, however miscellaneous may be the rest of its contents,—doubtless these, as channels of information, as moulding sentiment and opinion on matters of belief, have for ever taken from the Pulpit the monopoly of plastic sway which it once exerted over large portions of the people to whom it had some access, and Literature had none. The result of this beneficent change is simply that the Pulpit, as an institution, is no longer what it was ; it is no longer the sole religious educator of the great mass of the people, and of those who sit under it there are comparatively few, they are far from being all extinct, who, like Tennyson's Lincolnshire Farmer, think that what is said from it is all right, and that they are the better for having heard it whether they understood it or not. In a word, the measure of life that now remains to it is the measure of life that speaks from it, a life, however, not absolutely individual, but helped and winged by the associations of authority that will ever belong to any great and venerable institution, if adequately represented by the living forces to whom it affords a position of power—pulpit, chair, bench, throne of any sort, if they can use it. And, on the other hand, what a *gain* to the Pulpit is the more cultivated intelligence of those

whom it addresses, the wider range of illustration, the freedom and breadth of treatment it admits and invites! Every one may have had occasion to know the benumbing effect, the torpid touch of most respectable persons totally without culture,—how one may be reduced to a sense of utter vacuity, of painful helplessness, and even of positive inferiority to the company you are in, simply by the restraints of modesty and propriety as to the topics you may introduce with expectation of a response, without dread of the rudeness of forcing others to feel conscious and ashamed of the poverty or limitations of their being. Yet all animated intercourse has for its condition an absolute freedom from such fear, liberty to venture upon any allusion, to employ any illustration, to use any abbreviation of phrase argument or reference, to give course to any happy thought that may come sparkling to you, without an apprehension of your words falling dead, or of yourself being open to a suspicion of display. The more animated and varied intelligence of all who now put themselves in direct relations to it has unquestionably done much to deprive the Pulpit of any efficacious use of truisms and platitudes, of stereotyped formalities and official authority, for even in Sacerdotal Churches professional pretension is not now dissociated from eminent personal properties; but all this is a testimony not to its loss but to its gain, to the larger demands of the times on the natural vigour, the acquired knowledge, and the disciplined force of those who aspire to it. Accordingly, the modern Pulpit,

as compared with the Pulpit of a former age, is neither a dying echo of the past, nor occupied by inferior men, but conspicuously on a higher level, almost everywhere more earnest in depth, more free in movement, more rich in equipment, not seldom adorned with every accomplishment of learning, and instinct with genius. I am old enough to remember when Blair's Sermons were considered the highest attainment of Pulpit power in modern times, and far be it from me to speak a disrespectful word of those celebrated discourses, which I believe would still advantageously compare with many more fervid utterances in ethical wisdom and in Christian charity; but in power to touch the essential springs of spiritual life, in comprehension of the great permanent questions of religion, in any real, historic, conception of the nature and the province of the Bible, still less of the growth of Revelation itself, of the phenomena and laws of Christian development, they are not even within sight of the problems and the preachers of the present.

Yet the time has not come, nor will it ever come, when the diffusion of intelligence, or the universal instrumentality of Literature, will silence or supersede the Preacher's voice. The nature of the interest appealed to, its tender hidden sources, the way it comes to life, the nourishment it must have if it is not to fall back upon itself a timid spark of self-distrustful fire, must for ever forbid this. If there ever comes a famine of the Word, it will be not because spiritual life is abounding,

but because it is disappearing. Even if *all* were Prophets, the Prophets more eagerly than ever before would come together to "speak often one to another." Why is this? It is because religious utterance is not alone a tribute to God; it is an act of humanity, and its highest act, the one form of interchange of good the withholding of which would kill it in its seed, stifle its beginnings of life, put out unfed the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world, and make impossible a commonwealth of God. If even *Science*, whose data are facts patent to sense, or verifiable by methods that exclude uncertainty, cannot flourish without co-operation, without brotherly association, the freest interchange of faint hints, of individual suggestions, which may prove germs or indications of theoretic Truth, how shall *Faith*, all whose primary data are subjective, private whispers, flushings and vanishings of the inward life, felt touches on the spirit of another Spirit inspiring and soliciting, felt resistances to the spirit by another Spirit warning and protesting—however vivid at moments, yet not permanent, nor ostensible, nor reproducible at will, —how shall *Faith* live without fellowship, assert a universal and supreme authority upon an intermittent voice of unsupported testimony, or have warmth enough to grow and ripen its natural and supernatural fruits against all discouragements, if not sustained by the consenting witness of mankind? That which might be inoperative as long as it could be regarded as possibly an accident or an idiosyncracy, in the Church of the liv-

ing God is known to be the light by which we live. From the nature of the case it is impossible that the individual spirit should be independent of this confirmation; and to withhold it is at once breach of piety, breach of charity, breach of self-preservation. The printing press and the dead page can do much to communicate the latest gains, to impart the freshest spirit, of scientific research, though clearly not everything, else whence the avidity of scientific congresses for communion face to face; nor is *Faith* unable under certain conditions, and in a measure, to propagate herself, by this instrumentality; but Literature is not the power that pierces the cells where the diviner nature lies asleep and by its touch spreads the contagion of spiritual life; nor is there any man who knows the might of the silent voice that speaks within him who knows it not as the voice of many waters, swelling on the tones, breaking from the eyes of his fellow-men, when borne away by the spirit in the highest of all fellowships their souls are most aglow. How many, even of those who read with a highly cultured understanding, can penetrate to the spirit of Shakespeare, and see or feel all that was present to him, who have never experienced the magic of a perfect speaker, and the contagion of a multitude swayed by his power? It is told of Demosthenes that, in utter despair at his early failures, he was asked by a consummate actor to speak a few lines from Sophocles, which the actor then spoke in his own way, and that Demosthenes, with his new feeling of what

they conveyed, could scarcely believe that the words had not been changed. Now it is the work of a great preacher, I do not at all say by the same means, for spiritual life has its own conveyance, but by *some* magnetic touch of real insight and feeling, to do for the Gospels what could be done for Sophocles and Shakespeare, make their words alive and give out the fulness of their meaning.

Again, I deprecate being understood to make a successful ministry of the word of Life dependent on exceptional mental or physical endowments; that would be spiritual ignorance and presumption. It may have happened to many of us to be conscious of gaining most, of delighting most, in spiritual intercourse with some one person who had no other pre-eminence whatever, but in whom the reality of "the hidden man of the heart" could not be concealed. An ambassador for God, who in every council represents the invisible, and makes the unseen kingdom a present and dominant power, may be without what is called Genius, without creative imagination, without philosophic faculty, without exact learning or extensive knowledge; but with truth and righteousness he cannot speak in that Name without a vocation, without at least the consciousness of a divine communion that masters and moves himself, without a faith mightier than sight, for sight is temporal, in the eternal realities that feed his own being. He has to speak what he does know—out of experiences which instead of *taking* its tone and colour, *give* the aim, the word of

command, to outward life; he must not be the repeater of any man's lessons; with a mind printed like manufactured goods; the receiver, digester, and expositor of all that can be taught in Class-rooms about theological doctrines and their history. His subject is Religion, and of that he knows nothing but from the living scriptures for ever written afresh by the living Spirit. Not that he is independent of the human helps by which we stand where now we are; not that he is taken out of the line of the prophets, and without aid from history and development begins at the beginning, and receives everything from above at first hand. He might in that way receive enough to keep his own soul alive, but not to teach or lead mankind, to sum up the prophets and Christ in his own growth, as though the gradual progress of the past was no providential necessity. Still, all these have done nothing effectual for us until we have the witness within ourselves, and Christ himself helps us supremely only when he places us in his own position, leads us to the Father and leaves us alone with God. Without a knowledge of the history of the spiritual life of man, all that may now be written on one soul could not possibly be there, yet only when the Divine signatures are within ourselves do the prophets and Christ become not dead but alive, quickening and interpreting our being, their light passing to us as when face answers to face. It is this *experience*, the self-verifying nature of divine truth which gave the prophets their courage, and enables the youngest of them, if he does not exceed

his commission and lose himself in unreal pretensions, to deliver his message with a modest and a blameless confidence. When I was at College, the Professor of Moral Philosophy, Dr. John Young, a man of bold and stimulating eloquence, used to say to his Class, "Gentlemen, some of you will be preachers,—whatever you find in yourselves, fling it at them." And if this is for the most part a safe rule as regards a morbid self-knowledge, a knowledge of the seeds and the mystery of evil, with a far higher confidence must we rely on every movement of good in us as the normal inspiration of our nature,—on every suggestion, prompting, and intrusion of the Perfect, which we know not to be of our own origination, as not ours exclusively, though ours in the most absolute sense, but words spoken to us by the Parent Spirit whose voice the deafest of his children may come to hear.

If any one thinks this is *unreliable*, as not positive knowledge, and possibly only subjective dreams, I only say at present that as long as he so thinks the Christian Pulpit is not *his* place; the ministry of Religion, the function of the Prophet, the witnessing to Realities, cannot be his vocation. We may differ with our fellow-Christians about the theology, the systematising into a body of Doctrine, of the religious facts of experience and of history which are the data we have to deal with, but the first and essential thing is that we should be fully possessed of the spiritual realities to which the theories have to be adjusted. A man might as well write a

treatise on the Passions and Affections who never felt an emotion, as talk of Theology without having his heart moved with the life of God. The questions to be solved are not within his apprehension; their constituent elements are to him things unknown; and no one will ever speak a profitable or reconciling word on the deep unclosed questions of Atonement, or Depravity, or Conversion, or the everlasting forfeitures of Sin, who does not know how these questions take their rise out of his own personal relations to God, who has not trembled at the contrasts of the intreating nearness of His grace, and of the awful distance of His righteousness. It is a knowledge of the fundamental facts of all our evil and of all our good, brought into consistent relation with a Parent Spirit and with a Kingdom of Heaven, which can alone save any class of theologians, on the one hand, from being professional scribes and doctors of the law, living on empty traditions and speaking by rote; or, on the other, from being a mere school of sentimentalists without a growing nucleus of positive truth. What *are* the fundamental beliefs, capable of being stated in a doctrinal form, and which as far as we can have a system of faith give it to us, is the great question that throws light over the whole field of comparative religion; and it was when he who is the head of that Religion which, as we believe, sums up and perfects all the rest, in that Discourse which contains more of affirmative teaching about God than can be found anywhere else, laid his foundations, as in the Beatitudes,

on the rock of inward knowledge, on that contact of the Holy Spirit with our spirits which alone makes real ground, that the people stood astonished at the irresistible power of his Doctrine, and surrendered to the Authority with which he taught.

In estimating the permanent power of the Pulpit, the question, What are the legitimate themes of the Pulpit, is at this day a prime consideration. What is the province of the religious teacher? It is clearly not the same as that of the scientific teacher; nor has it specially to do with any department of knowledge that does not require a response from the spiritual nature before it can be accepted. These departments, indeed, furnish indispensable knowledge to the preacher, but they are not his proper field. They supply the sphere within which a divine Faith must fitly move; the known conditions, whether of abstract Truth, or of the whole frame of Things, from the infinitely vast to the infinitely minute, to which the conceptions of the soul have to rise; the facts of His universe, of His Laws or Methods, of the scale of His being, which Religion in her thought of God may not contradict nor fall below, but which, as being really food for her faith, she may harmoniously transcend. This is mainly what Faith has to do with Science—to allow it to enlarge our knowledge, that it may exalt and ennoble our Beliefs. The province of Faith does not dwindle, it grows, when Science gives to Intuition a grander frame of Things to gaze at, ampler grounds for limitless trusts and expecta-

tions, and the presence everywhere of a serene Power, without variableness of temper, and that cannot be provoked, in contemplation of which all superstitions must pass away in filial confidence and worship. It is a boundless gain to Faith when it has to rise into harmony with all Knowledge. But all this gain is forfeited if Faith, thus fed by Knowledge, does not all the more stand on her own ground, and speak in her own voice. The Prophet confronts the Scientist only by supplementing him—not by perpetual protests, which sound like fears, against the agnosticism of Science, or the scepticism of Science, or the bearings of Science on miraculous interpositions or the mechanical demonstrations of an obsolete natural Theology but—by a full-voiced utterance of the class of facts which belong to his own sphere—the things which are spiritually discerned; inward experiences which are at least as real as outward ones; contacts of spirit with a Spirit *which is not ourselves*, which are at least as verifiable as contacts of sense with a world *which is not ourselves;* the hunger and thirst of the soul; its imperative demands; its authoritative ideals; its wants, its sorrows, and its wounds,—with the light and life from above which are offered to it. Upon this ground the Preacher is unassailable, and whilst the light of Science may raise Faith to wider and truer vision, it cannot have upon its lips one word of legitimate contradiction. An alleged absence of experience does not disprove positive experience and the general consent of mankind; as colour-

blindness does not destroy the realities of colour. When the people come together to worship God and to nourish their inward life, they are offering themselves in faith, presenting themselves for a baptism of the spirit and of fire, expecting bread from heaven and living water, and sadly they go away, not hungry only, for the hunger is divine, but very humanly discontented and resentful, if they find themselves addressed as if they were an assembly of sceptics and unbelievers, and with arguments which, even to sceptics and unbelievers, would be of small avail,—for the needs of those in whom the spiritual life is latent, and of those in whom it is eager and craving, are best supplied by the same means, the vivid presentment to them of the divine realities that quicken and satisfy the soul.

Nor is this true only of spiritual life; it rules in the region of what is called Æsthetics. In looking recently at the Life of Hippolyte Flandrin, a good Christian as well as a great painter, I was struck by his testimony that only "*affirmative teaching*," those are the words of the translation from the French, is of any avail in Art; that criticism and the demonstration of defects gave little help and no inspiration to his pupils; that only familiarity with what is excellent preserved from what is false, and elicited the efforts of desire to understand its mystery, and to become qualified to work in its spirit. Of course there is a time, for there is a time for all things, to resist the encroachments of Science, if it should illogically step out of its

own ample sphere; but that time is not when a Christian congregation, by the very fact of their coming together, show themselves to be not doubting, but believing, looking for strong spiritual food, or weary and fainting and longing to renew their strength. Then is the time for the personal word, "Thus saith the Lord," relying on the response that will freely be given to it, and that prophecy with its burden, privately accredited as it must ever be, is yet of no private ownership or interpretation, but finds out the divine secret of all. Outside of personal authoritative relations there is no Religion. Without these all the life recorded in the Scriptures is not the life indeed, from God and in his sons, but the letter without the spirit. "Search," or if so it should be, "Ye search the Scriptures," said our Lord, "for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of *me;* and ye will not come to *me* that ye might have life." In *him*, not in *them*, the life was; in him, not in them, it was having its fulfilment. We are told that all the past is distributed under three ages, the Theological, the Metaphysical, the Positive. However that may be, there is an age yet to come, the Spiritual age, the age of the reign and development of the divine Law that is in our nature, of the Prophecies that are within our souls, from which not one jot or tittle shall pass away till all be fulfilled,—and if former things fall away, it is because newer life is coming to the birth. Gentlemen, it will be your work in the world to help this fulfilment. The seeds of

promise are within yourselves; their culture lies in knowledge of whatever light has come into the world, in faithfulness to whatever light has come to you. Revelation is only a response from on high to the divinely prompted projections of our own nature, answers from above to great questions which the quickened spirit is for ever putting. Only what has roots and germs in our own souls is of the Kingdom of Heaven, of the realm of Faith, of the substance of revealed Truth. Preserve the enthusiasm of your youth; for surely only a devout enthusiasm could make you offer yourselves for this service; and enthusiasm lives on sacrifice. According to your faithfulness will it be unto you. If you are to live in the spirit you must walk by the spirit,—else, the vision departs, the light dies, the vocation is dishonoured and lost,—and according to that fine but most mournful line from the *Christian Year*, of the truth of which the best of us know too much,—

. . . "in mouldering hope and joy,
The Man seems following still the funeral of the Boy."

And in connection with a Rule of life loftily observed, there now rises before our minds the image of the eminent man, an officer of this College, who, from earliest manhood to extreme old age, pursued with a great fidelity the high vocation of the Scholar. On the first occasion that a Visitor here has exercised his office since the death of a Colleague with whom it was an honour to be in any way associated, a tributary word

must be spoken, which it will be a less discredit to speak imperfectly than to leave unattempted. As Professor of the Classical Languages and their Literature, and of History, he long since fixed in these departments the standard aims of this College, and to *him*, if to any man, we owe the rank it has maintained during the seventy years of his connection with it. Your present Principal, your late Principal, were among the number of his pupils, ever proud of their Master,—whilst for himself he never ceased to be a student to the latest hour of existence. It is not my place to give an account of Mr. Kenrick's works: I speak of him here only as an example and a model of some of the highest qualities which adorn the life to which you, Gentlemen, are to be devoted. Every man's work is subject to the conditions of his nature. To Mr. Kenrick did not belong the intuitive insight or foresight which anticipates criticism and logic, and sees, before it can prove, the divine order of Truth. To be in masterly possession of whatever the historian can know, of whatever exact learning can recommend, and to be loyal before God and the world to what he knew, was his Rule of life as the servant and the minister of Truth. The weight of traditional impressions, the authority of honoured names, of his own household, he was not prone to cast off,—yet was he ever a man of progress, with this signal advantage in the gradual advances of the scholar, that, as he moved only in the light of knowledge, every step was taken securely, every position yielded by him

ceased to be maintainable, every new ground occupied by him ceased to be debatable land. This *thoroughness* of knowledge, with the highest finish of execution, distinguished all that he did; it was the ideal which he served, and in which he delighted. Every work of his hand, though it was only an easy letter to a friend, was brightened and relieved, all over, by every touch of illustration, every charm of allusion, every spark of quick or playful intelligence, every felicity of expression, which the subject would gracefully admit. He had a fine sense of his proper sphere, and had too much dignity either to overstep it, or to move inadequately within it. Whatever he attempted was perfect of its kind; nothing that came from him could be mended. Even the careful beauty of his hand-writing, up to his ninetieth year, was an example and a reproof to younger men. Of him may be said, what was said of one like him in nothing else, of a rarer genius indeed, but of less solid habits of mind, *Nihil tetigit quod non ornavit.* In these respects, as Scholar, Student of Sacred Learning, conscientious workman after an ideal pattern, devout worshipper, true witness, faithful to the spiritual liberty to which he was free-born, meekly enduring whatever worldly loss or obscurity its service might exact,—and, to crown these, as a good man, and a Christian gentleman, "he being dead yet speaketh," to you, and to us all.

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